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Half of Heaven? An approach to Chinese women from a gender perspective

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Abstract

China, a country traditionally closed into itself, takes decades opening his economy and society to the outside. This opening also means an opening of the mentality of its people. What happens with regard to gender issues? How the mentality of the Chinese men and, especially, of the Chinese women has changed? This article intends to conduct a brief look at these issues through my experience living and studying in that society, but, above all, through some parts of a study conducted in 2012, under the direction of professors of University of Salamanca (Spain). This study was conducted with several discussion groups composed of Chinese students (girls) studying at universities and language schools in Spain.

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1. Context

May 4, 2014, newspaper editorial: China's news², in 2014 China will displace the United States as first country in the world in the production of wealth. Four months earlier, December 28, 2013, another newspaper editorial³: China relaxes the one-child policy. Two years earlier, June 14, 2012, another newspaper editorial⁴: The Chinese government requires a woman to abort at seven months of pregnancy, because it could not pay the fine. These are only editorials on newspapers, but reflect a social reality that social researchers must refine.

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² http://elpais.com/elpais/2014/05/01/opinion/1398943784_668056.html, accessed 04/05/2014.

³ http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2013/12/28/actualidad/1388224041_080576.html, accessed 04/05/2014.

⁴ <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2012/06/14/internacional/1339670089.html>, accessed 04/05/2014.

China is growing very fast economically, in a few years it has gone from being an isolated country to open itself to the rest of the planet. It has grown so quickly that is about to overtake the U.S. as world power. But that economic openness is not reflected in improving the quality of life of its people. Focusing on women, these one have not yet achieved equality with men, but live under exclusion and violence from various areas of Chinese society. In the XXI century women in China still view as the state assaults its body imposing rules and practices that directly harm their freedom and health.

In this brief article I want to refer to various forms of violence and exclusion that women are suffering in China and how society reacts and awareness around this issue. I do not intend to make more than a brief appeal to the conscience and international reflection on this issue, because the space is not enough for more. Part of what brought on these pages comes from the findings of a sociological study that was conducted in 2012 with Chinese students in Salamanca, Spain.

2. Discrimination, exclusion and abuse in different areas of Chinese society

2.1. Chinese tradition

First of all, we must differentiate between rural women and urban women in China. This distinction is important because there have been large differences in lifestyle, the vicissitudes through which it has been through a rural woman are different than those experienced by urban woman. For example, the practice of foot reduction was more practised in urban families, in fact it was seen as a practice of cultivated and educated people, and rural population used to be out of that definition. This definition as educated people was mentioned by foreigners⁵ visiting China, which defined the practice as of civilized nations, surely no one now would make that claim today. Also the one-child policy has affected more urban women than rural women. There was another variable that was crossed with urban-rural variable: ethnicity. Different ethnicities to the Han, which normally belonged to rural areas, were allowed to have more than one child.

Women in China have been through centuries of subjugation, exclusion, subordination and degradation due to various aspects of Chinese culture. The teachings of philosophers and traditions have adversely affected women simply because they are women. An example of the teachings of the philosophers are the words of Mencius: "Not for a woman to decide anything by itself, but she must be subject to the rule of the Three Obedience. When young she must always obey their parents; when married she has to obey her husband; when is a widow she must obey her son" (Mencius, cited in Starr, 1993).

Art also speaks us about society and culture in other epochs. Through centuries of art in China we can see that the model of feminine beauty was wanted at the time, and it was always the same: a delicate, white, demure, obedient, helpful woman. That ideal of feminine beauty, existing in men, did suffer women to an unimaginable degree. It is known throughout the world the practice of reducing women's feet to make them small, so they will walk like sweet and graceful women in the eyes of men. The reality is that: in this way the woman was limited the rest of her life and dependent on men. "Beauty can make a woman be rich, but if that woman rely only on her looks to get ahead, she will live forever subjugated by a man. I think all women should strive for something. Respecting gets only working hard". (Ma, 2014: 224)

But there were many others traditions that would do great harm to the female population, for example: the preference for having a son. Sons were more valued than daughters. This can be seen by those sentences that have survived until today as the "better breeding swans than have daughters." The low value that women have come

⁵ Portuguese religious Gaspar da Cruz wrote: "Women commonly, other than the coast and the mountains, they are very white and gentiles, some have their nose and eyes provided. From childhood they sell the feet, which makes them smaller, and they do this to be more elegant and beautiful with small noses and feet. This is a custom narrow well-educated people and not among the vile" (Quoted in Reloba Ferrero, 2012: 85). From the sixteenth century there were many who traveled to China and they have been written very interesting contributions for scholars today. Statements like this from that Portuguese religious would be unthinkable today.

to have in China is such that a teacher in a women's school in rural China claimed that "woman is worth less than a chicken"⁶.

2.2. Chinese laws

"In China, men live usually dominated by three systems of authority (political authority, clan and religious). Regarding women, besides being subjected to these three systems of authority, they are dominated by men (marital authority) These four authorities - politics, clan, religious and masculine - embody the ideology and patriarchal feudal system as a whole and are the four thick sagas that binding the Chinese people..." (Mao Zedong in Reloba Ferrero, 2012: 100)

Chinese woman have lived centuries of subjugation and finally in the twentieth century her equality with men is recognized. Even so, many women died years prior to the arrival of the nationalist republic and during this because they fought against laws that harmed them. "Many women died in China during the Nationalist Kuomintang Republic, blamed for wanting to tear down the existing values family, or just for wearing her hair like a man or pants instead of women's clothing" (Reloba Ferrero, 2012: 33). With the advent of communism women get their best situation, laws finally gave their equality with men, at least in theory, for in the day to day the tradition of previous centuries would strongly rooted. However, Mao did not seek equality for women therefore particularly sensitive to the suffering of female population, but for the construction of the new communist society.

But during the XX century and in the XXI century too, it still appear laws that went against the freedom and equality of women, laws that exclude, subjugate and violate them.

2.2.1. One child policy

Not everything, since the victory of communism in later, would be good for women. In the late seventies, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the one child policy carried out. This would mean a great suffering for the female population there in front, as women had to perform treatments to prevent pregnancies, selective abortions (the fetus was annihilated when it was a female), advanced pregnancies abortions (up to seven eight months), forced sterilization, etc.. "If a panda becomes pregnant, the whole country celebrates, but if a woman becomes pregnant treated her like a criminal." (Ma, 2014: 101).

2.2.2. Marriage Law

The marriage law of 1950, after the Communist victory, grant equality to women after centuries of subjection to their husbands. In 1980 it come into force a new law of marriage that continued the work of the first. The problem has come with the reform of that one in 2011, according to which in case of divorce the house will be for whoever brought into the marriage. This reform has been the outcry of those who seek equality of women, because in a country like China, where the pay gap between men and women is the largest in the world making it nearly impossible for a woman to buy the house, this is an aberration. She will deliver the best years of her life devoted to her husband and children and finally expelled from marriage maybe with no right of recognition.

2.3. Married life

For centuries women first are under their family, then when married they are under their husband. With the advent of communism these changes at least are according to the law. But in marriage the woman is assaulted by her husband. According to a study we conducted in Salamanca, Spain, in 2012, young Chinese women who came to Spain to study, declared that it is normal for the husband stick occasionally women due to the pressure of

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8GOuyOuNeOE> , accessed 04/05/2014.

life and job. But the next day the husband would ask forgiveness of heart and women end up forgiving. These statements coming from these young attentions. This was a comment from a young Chinese girl:

For women in China is very difficult to decide to separate from her man even so, because the next day when a man is normal or not drunk going to ask your partner for forgiveness in a very strong way, very sincere. The heart of woman is always very soft. (Reloba Ferrero, 2012: 88)

3. Social awareness

Chinese society gradually becoming more aware about the problem of gender and domestic violence, although it is a slow evolution due to the ethos of the Chinese people. They are making legislative progress as the 1992 Act for the Guarantee of Rights and Interests of Women, the holding of the World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, Program for the Development of Chinese Women 2001-2010. These and many other actions are taking place in Chinese society because women are taking firm steps towards equality and respect. But much work remains, still in 2011, in China, the gender violence was not seen as something punishable.

4. Considerations on Chinese feminism

In this sense, seen all seen, the feminist movement is needed to achieve equality for women and for the female population achieve better conditions. "The specialists of women in China are typically blunt when explaining that they are not interested to import Western feminism, but they want to develop a new women's studies developed in China" (Roces and Edwards, 2010: 53-74). Feminism is a universal struggle, every women have to face various degrees of subordination, exclusion and mistreatment by patriarchal and sexist society. This does not mean that the path is followed is the same everywhere. In China feminism has specific characteristics, but the fight is the same. The arrival of communism made invisible the struggle of women mistaking with the communist struggle. Through our study in 2012 it was observed that young students believed that the events were taking place in China were normal in order to control the population and from the West is not judged properly or understood.

In the XXI century the Chinese feminist movement, like the entire country, has returned to the international arena, contacting the outside again. After decades of communist enclosure it received again an influx of contact with the West, but the government wants to control it. (Reloba Ferrero, 2013: 17).

5. In conclusion

Maybe the woman in China would not be allowed to be up half of heaven, as Mao sought. After promising steps by communism in mid-twentieth century, the reality is that women are going to times that were considered outdated. In the XXI century China lives under a ultra-radical market capitalism, in that context the woman has to give rights to succeed. As a woman reaches into space, one million one live in extreme poverty having to sell their dignity often to succeed.

Nu Wa, in Chinese legends, was the creator of all things, she was a woman, but China is a patriarchal society yet, where Confucian values have affected women limiting them just for being women. China is a society with great capacity to improve and with great fighters for human rights and equality between men and women.

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